DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 739 RC 021 889

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TITLE Contemporary Issues Education: Rural Risks, Obstacles and Resources.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 10p.; In: Rural Special Education for the New Millennium. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (19th, Albuquerque, New Mexico, March 25-27, 1999); see RC 021 888.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Controversial Issues (Course Content); *Daily Living Skills; Disabilities; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *Prevention; Risk; *Rural Urban Differences; *Special Education; Special Education Teachers; Tables (Data); Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Arizona; Missouri

ABSTRACT

Youth with disabilities are particularly susceptible to dangerous outcomes associated with contemporary issues such as teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Several studies document the high degree of social, medical, and legal risk to which youth with disabilities are exposed. The extent to which public schools provide risk reduction for students through prevention and protection programs varies across communities. In addition, special education students may be excluded from the programs that are offered. A survey of 509 teachers (primarily special education teachers) in Missouri and Arizona examined the extent to which they addressed 45 contemporary issues with their students. Respondents included rural and urban teachers of students with mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behavioral and emotional disorders, as well as typical students. For all teachers, the most frequently discussed issues were attitudes toward disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, tobacco use, racism, teen pregnancy, and domestic violence; the least discussed areas were homosexuality, rape, abortion, child sexual abuse, and sexual promiscuity. In all but two categories, more rural special educators addressed the high risk issues than did urban special educators. Most frequently mentioned obstacles to discussing contemporary issues included conservative community attitudes and lack of time for rural educators, and lack of time and materials for urban educators. Data tables detail survey responses. Contains 10 references. (SV)

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ED 429 739

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES EDUCATION: RURAL RISKS, OBSTACLES AND RESOURCES

Youth across the country are grappling with issues such teenage pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, child abuse, rape, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, gang activity and delinquency, racism, abortion, domestic violence, and tobacco use. Youth with disabilities are particularly susceptible to dangerous outcomes associated with these contemporary issues. As the inclusion movement continues to integrate students with disabilities into communities, these students are placed more often into a variety of vulnerable situations in which they may be exploited and manipulated. How can the risks associated with contemporary issues be reduced for students with disabilities? Given the enormous numbers of special education students in mainstreamed settings and the costs of the social, legal, medical, and personal outcomes of their victimization, the question of risk reduction is of vital importance.

In this paper, we will explore the education of students with disabilities in terms of these contemporary issues. We will focus on:

(1) A review of some of the risks experienced by students with disabilities,
(2) A summary of an ongoing study of the efforts and experiences reported by rural and urban classroom teachers in addressing these risks and issues, and
(3) An overview of the supports that might facilitate teacher efforts to address contemporary issues education in the future.

Several studies document the high degree of social, medical, and legal risk to which youth with disabilities are exposed. Some of these risks are listed below.

- The prevalence of alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and suicide is significantly greater among adolescents with learning disorders, emotional disorders, and behavioral disorders than among peers who are not disabled (Forness, 1986; Leone, Greenberg, Trickett, & Spero, 1989).
- A disproportionate number of students with disabilities are the victims of sexual abuse. Teens with disabilities are particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation because of their dependence on caregivers, emotional and social insecurities, and a lack of education regarding sexuality and sexual abuse. In a study of young women with mental retardation referred for birth control, it was found that 25% had been sexually abused (Chamberlain, Rauh, Passer, McGrath, & Burket, 1984).
- The incidence of pregnancy among adolescent girls with disabilities is approximately 20%, which is disproportionately high in comparison to peers without disabilities (Kleinfeld & Young, 1989).
- Almost 30% of youths incarcerated in correctional facilities have been identified as having disabilities (Rutherford, Nelson & Wolford, 1989). Young offenders with disabilities are more likely to plead guilty, less likely to plea bargain, more often convicted, less likely to be paroled or placed on probation, and serve longer sentences than nondisabled youths incarcerated for the same crimes (Santamour, 1987).

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The extent to which public schools provide risk reduction for students through prevention and protection programs varies across communities. Research indicates that even when schools do provide risk-reduction programs, many students in special education are excluded. For example, several studies that describe the substance abuse epidemic point out that students with disabilities are frequently excluded from available drug abuse prevention programs. A National School Boards Association study reported similar findings in the area of HIV-prevention education. This study indicated that fewer than 25% of students with autism received HIV-prevention education and fewer than 50% of students with emotional disturbance or mental retardation received such instruction (National School Boards Association, 1990). Significant numbers of students with disabilities are excluded from discussions of extremely important controversial issues in the classroom.

In spite of how parents, teachers, or administrators may personally feel about topics such as teen sex, abortion, gangs, child abuse, suicide, or drugs, special education students are struggling to contend with these issues often without the necessary information and support. To investigate the role of special education teachers in this area, we (Lamorey & Leigh, 1996; Leigh & Lamorey, 1996; Leigh, Huntze, & Lamorey, 1995) explored the extent to which special education teachers addressed various contemporary issues with a variety of special education students.

Through the use of a survey instrument, we gathered information regarding the extent to which 45 contemporary issues were addressed by special education and general education teachers across Missouri and Arizona. The purpose of the survey was descriptive in nature, that is, to investigate the extent to which teachers address a range of contemporary issues and to elicit teacher comments regarding obstacles and needs relative to contemporary issues education.

A list of the contemporary issues from the survey is presented in Table 1. This list of issues was constructed from a pool of items that represented controversial subjects not addressed in the traditional academic curriculum. Development of the survey is discussed in more detail by Leigh, Huntze, and Lamorey (1995).

Initially, packets of surveys were mailed to principals of 270 randomly selected school districts in the state of Missouri. Principals were asked to distribute the surveys to a teacher of students with mental retardation (MR), a teacher of students with behavioral and emotional disorders (BED), and a teacher of students with learning disabilities (LD). A total of 407 teachers completed and returned the survey instrument. The Missouri respondents included 151 teachers of students with LD, 142 teachers of students with MR, and 114 teachers of students with BED.

Copies of the survey were also mailed to principals of about 150 high schools in Arizona with instructions to distribute the surveys to teachers of students with LD, with BED, with MR, and teachers of typical learners. At this point we have tallied the responses of 102 urban and rural Arizona teachers. Arizona respondents included 39 teachers of students with LD, 20 teachers of students with MR, 10 teachers of students with BED, 11 teachers of cross-categorical classrooms, and 22 teachers of typical learners.

In completing the survey, teachers were asked to rate each item on a scale according to the extent to which they addressed the topics with their students. For example, a rating of 1 indicated that the teacher did not address the topic with a majority of students, a rating of 2 indicated that the teacher addressed the topic to a very limited extent, a rating of 3 indicated that the topic was addressed to some extent, and a rating of 4 indicated that the teacher addressed the topic fully and completely.

The results of the survey were rich in content as teachers took a considerable amount of time to include written responses regarding their roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of needs in contemporary issues education. The results will be discussed initially in terms of the ratings of the extent to which teachers addressed various contemporary issues. In addition, comparisons of the ratings of urban and rural special educators as well as general educators will be explored. Finally, an analysis of the teachers' comments will be presented.

Mean ratings were computed for each of the 45 items for each disability group. These means are displayed in Table 1. It is evident that most special education teachers did not address these topics to much extent. On average, even the topics with the highest ratings were addressed only "to some extent" (a rating of 3 on the scale). The most commonly addressed topics were "attitudes towards disabilities", "tobacco use", "drug use" and "moral and ethical values". In fact, more than half of the topics received item mean ratings of less than 2.0 from teachers of students with LD as well as from teachers in the MR area meaning that in general they were covered in a very limited manner.

The group mean ratings reported in Table 1 suggest that teachers of students with BED address these topics to a significantly greater extent than teachers of students with either MR or LD. The results of an ANOVA and Scheffe comparing the composite means for each disability group indicated that the only statistically significant difference occurred between the means obtained for the BED and LD categories. Even though the Scheffe test, which is relatively conservative, provided results suggesting that significant mean differences existed, the small numerical difference between the two means (both of which round to a rating of 2) should be noted, as the practical significance of such a difference is questionable.

A second analysis of the Arizona data focused on the differences between rural special educators, urban special educators, and urban general educators. For this analysis, 19 of the most high risk categories were chosen for comparisons, and the percentage of responses for ratings of 3 and 4 were combined to determine an indicator of the extent to which each contemporary issue was addressed by the various groups of educators. Results according to the five most frequently addressed issues and the five least frequently addressed are indicated below and the expanded results are shown in Table 2.

Top Five Items Discussed By Teachers

Urban educators of typical students:	Urban educators of students w/disabilities	Rural educators of students w/disabilities
drug abuse (86%),	attitudes re disabilities (81%)	attitudes re disabilities (60%)
tobacco use (73%),	racism (57%)	tobacco use (60%)
racism (73%),	tobacco use (53%)	teen pregnancy (59%)
teen pregnancy (69%),	drug abuse (50%)	drug abuse (59%)
attitudes re disabilities (69%)	domestic violence (37%)	alcohol abuse (59%)

Five Items Least Discussed By Teachers

Urban educators of typical students:	Urban educators of students w/disabilities	Rural educators of students w/disabilities
homosexuality (10%)	abortion (4%)	homosexuality (15%)
abortion (27%)	homosexuality (9%)	rape (18%)
rape (32%)	rape (11%)	child abuse (sexual) (18%)
child abuse (sexual) (41%)	sexual promiscuity (15%)	abortion (18%)
sexual promiscuity (41%)	child abuse (sexual) (18%)	sexual promiscuity (27%)

In general, the urban educators of typical students addressed these high risk contemporary issues to a greater extent than did the special educators. Furthermore, in all but two categories, more of the rural special educators addressed the high risk issues than did the urban special educators. In nine of the 19 high risk categories, 10% to 24% more rural special educators addressed high risk issues than did urban special educators.

It is interesting to note that the rural special educators were more often providing contemporary issues education to students as compared to urban educators as often the rural communities are portrayed as more conservative environments wherein families are considered self-sufficient. In the narratives provided by teachers, the rural teachers often noted that they felt bound by community standards and school board policy to avoid controversial issues at all costs. As teachers wrote: "In the district I work for most of these issues are considered the responsibility of the family and we are encouraged not to talk about them in class." "Our school has ruled on some of these topics and does not permit them." "I would be fired in a nanosecond if I touched any of these issues." Thirty-nine percent of the comments by rural educators concerning barriers to discussing contemporary issues focused on the obstacle of conservative community standards/school officials. Twenty-seven percent of the rural educators' comments regarding obstacles focused on the lack of time and 14% of the rural educators' comments reflected teacher concerns about the students' ability levels relative to the perceived complexity of some of the high risk issues.

Urban special educators did not address these contemporary issues as frequently as their rural counterparts. Obstacles noted by urban educators included lack of time (24%), lack of materials (19%), community standards/officials (15%) and parental resistance (12%). The lack of materials was significant for the urban educators, but negligible for the rural educators. Very few educators from either rural or urban settings indicated that a lack of training prohibited them from addressing contemporary issues.

Changes that urban educators felt would facilitate their involvement in teaching contemporary issues included more and better materials (51%), a district requirement that the material be taught (8%), and better leadership (6%). Rural educators indicated that the following changes would enhance their ability to teach contemporary issues: district guidelines/permission (25%), appropriate materials (22%), a coalition of community agencies involved in teaching these issues (15%), and more freedom (6%).

It is important to note that we do not believe that the results of the study provide a basis for criticism of today's special education teachers. Teachers in our society already assume responsibility for students' lives that extend far beyond what might be regarded as reasonable. It seems that society expects teachers not only to address the intellectual, physical, academic, linguistic, social/emotional, and vocational needs of students, but also to do so with minimal resources and rewards, and in the context of environmental and societal conditions that make the task all but impossible. To expect special education teachers simply to take on an additional burden of responsibility involving contemporary issues education would be unfair and unworkable.

If it is to occur meaningfully, contemporary issues education must involve a shared commitment among educators, parents, and others in the community. Generally, teachers reported that they were willing and able to provide contemporary issues education for students with disabilities if they had the support, time, guidelines, and materials to do the job. The next steps in addressing contemporary issues must subsequently be:

- to begin to develop meaningful materials which can be adapted for a variety of settings, a variety of student learning styles, and which can be used in modular form for a variety of district requirements,

- to encourage parents, students, teachers, administrators, social service providers, and other community members to participate in choosing content and materials,
- to develop opportunities to discuss contemporary issues in the context of class activities in order to address time constraints,
- establish ground rules regarding confidentiality and respect for others' opinions, and
- present materials at developmentally appropriate ages using a variety of teaching styles and strategies.

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Table 1. Survey Items, Mean, & Standard Deviations of Teacher Ratings By Disability Group

	BED	MR	LD
Attitudes towards people with disabilities	3.23 (.88)	3.11(.97)	2.96(.97)
Tobacco use	3.22(.90)	3.11(1.0)	2.77(.96)
Drug use	3.12(.99)	2.98(1.06)	2.66(1.07)
Moral and ethical values	3.09 (.97)	2.92(.93)	2.78(1.06)
Alcohol abuse	2.98(1.1)	2.89(1.06)	2.53(1.11)
Divorce	2.86(.93)	2.43(.95)	2.38(.96)
Racism	2.74(1.02)	2.40(1.04)	2.31(1.04)
Environmental protection	2.66(.99)	2.60(.90)	2.42(.95)
Death	2.63(.96)	2.43(.94)	2.23(.94)
Violence in the media/movies	2.58(.96)	2.39(.94)	2.27(.92)
Domestic violence	2.56(1.04)	2.28(.93)	2.02(1.00)
AIDS/HIV	2.50(1.05)	2.34(1.14)	2.14(1.10)
Child abuse (physical violence)	2.53(1.04)	2.36(.97)	1.99(1.03)
Homelessness/poverty	2.47(.94)	2.39(1.00)	2.13(.96)
Suicide	2.43(1.03)	2.02(.98)	1.85(.95)
Deception in commercial advertising	2.32(1.01)	2.44(1.07)	2.23(1.07)
Gang activity	2.27(1.04)	1.80(.98)	1.71(.93)
General sexual education	2.26(1.08)	2.20(1.13)	1.91(1.05)
Teenage pregnancy	2.25(1.11)	2.31(1.22)	1.94(1.13)
Appropriateness of military intervention	2.19(.90)	1.92(.86)	1.98(.88)
Gun control	2.17(.93)	1.83(.85)	1.70(.76)
Lyrics of rock music/videos	2.15(.98)	1.84(.87)	1.71(.87)
Gender discrimination	2.15(.98)	1.80(.88)	1.80(.84)
Sexual promiscuity	2.12(1.08)	1.95(1.09)	1.76(1.04)
Child abuse (sexual abuse/incest)	2.10(1.10)	1.99(.99)	1.62(.89)
Sexual harassment	2.08(.93)	1.78(.88)	1.62(.86)
Religious intolerance	2.07(.89)	1.77(.84)	1.77(.90)
Social welfare and entitlement programs	2.04(.93)	1.94(.96)	1.65(.78)
Attitudes towards immigrants	2.02(1.04)	1.90(.94)	1.89(.87)
Safe sex	2.10(1.14)	1.97(1.23)	1.75(1.04)
Sex in media/movies	2.00(.98)	1.82(.72)	1.76(.79)
Differences among religions	1.94(.87)	1.71(.72)	1.76(.79)
Cults	1.88(.88)	1.53(.78)	1.80(.87)
Abortion	1.87(1.04)	1.70(.94)	1.56(.87)
Rape	1.87(1.0)	1.73(.90)	1.50(.84)
Governmental waste/fraud	1.87(.83)	1.71(.81)	1.74(.86)
Political propaganda	1.78(.87)	1.73(.93)	1.73(.85)
Social/political dissent	1.78(.82)	1.64(.82)	1.58(.78)
Church/state separation issues	1.72(.81)	1.57(.84)	1.53(.69)
Nuclear energy	1.71(.82)	1.57(.79)	1.58(.78)
Homosexuality	1.68(.91)	1.44(.64)	1.46(.79)
Animal rights issues	1.66(.75)	1.59(.78)	1.48(.68)
Pornography	1.61(.89)	1.44(.71)	1.33(.68)
Nonviolent resistance	1.55(.80)	1.31(.58)	1.33(.59)
Evolution vrs creationism	1.48(.70)	1.27(.53)	1.38(.71)

Table 2. High Risk Items Ranked By Teacher Categories

Q# 3 Tobacco Use

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	6	33	36	24
Disabled Urban	15	33	33	20
Typical Urban	0	27	23	50

Q# 4 Racism

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	18	30	36	15
Disabled Urban	15	28	37	20
Typical Urban	5	18	64	14

Q# 9 Homosexuality

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	55	30	15	0
Disabled Urban	50	41	9	0
Typical Urban	68	23	5	5

Q# 14 Domestic Violence

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	19	43	25	13
Disabled Urban	33	30	2	9
Typical Urban	18	27	32	23

Q# 18 Suicide

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	38	28	31	3
Disabled Urban	35	46	13	7
Typical Urban	18	27	27	27

Q# 19 AIDS/HIV

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	27	33	21	18
Disabled Urban	26	44	20	11
Typical Urban	14	32	27	27

Q# 23 Teenage Pregnancy

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	27	12	27	32
Disabled Urban	24	41	26	9
Typical Urban	9	23	23	46

Q# 27 Divorce

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	41	28	16	16

Disabled Urban	33	48	15	4
Typical Urban	23	27	27	23

Q#28 Attitudes toward people with disabilities

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	12	27	33	27
Disabled Urban	4	15	37	44
Typical Urban	5	27	23	46

Q# 30 Gang activity

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	24	36	30	9
Disabled Urban	20	50	22	9
Typical Urban	14	23	27	36

Table 2. High Risk Items Ranked By Teacher Categories (continued)

Q# 31 Safe sex

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	30	33	24	12
Disabled Urban	37	44	13	7
Typical Urban	32	17	17	41

Q#32 Alcohol abuse

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	12	27	32	27
Disabled Urban	11	44	32	11
Typical Urban	9	23	18	50

Q#34 General sex education

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	34	31	16	19
Disabled Urban	47	29	18	7
Typical Urban	27	23	23	27

Q# 35 Drug use

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	18	18	24	35
Disabled Urban	17	33	35	15
Typical Urban	0	14	36	50

Q# 36 Sexual promiscuity

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	33	39	18	9
Disabled Urban	41	44	11	4
Typical Urban	18	41	18	23

Q#38 Rape

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	49	33	15	3
Disabled Urban	44	46	11	0
Typical Urban	41	27	18	14

Q#41 Abortion

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	52	30	15	3
Disabled Urban	59	37	4	0
Typical Urban	59	14	27	0

Q#42 Child abuse in the form of physical violence

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	24	41	24	9
Disabled Urban	28	44	24	4
Typical Urban	14	36	23	27

Q#43 Child abuse in the form of sexual behavior including incest

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	38	44	12	6
Disabled Urban	42	40	11	7
Typical Urban	27	32	18	23